

What is Theory?

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will be introduced to sociological theory. We will begin with the basics: What is theory? How is theory useful to sociologists? Where do theories come from? You will see that theory is the building block of the discipline, and it's how sociologists make sense of the findings from the entire history of sociology research. You will also explore how sociological theory strengthens the self and social awareness skill. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Connecting Facts Into Theories

In this section, you'll learn about how sociologists use paradigms to understand the social world. A theoretical perspective (also called a **paradigm**) is a broad viewpoint, perspective, or lens that permits social scientists to have a wide range of tools to describe society, and then to build hypotheses and theories. You can also consider them to be guiding principles or belief systems. The existence of different theoretical perspectives is why multiple sociologists can look at the same events or institutions and draw different conclusions. These paradigms enable sociologists to better understand themselves and others, building their **self and social awareness skill**.



HINT

You'll sometimes see the word paradigm used interchangeably with theoretical perspective or approach. Sociologists study social events, interactions, and patterns, and they develop **theory** to explain why things work as they do. **Sociological theory** is used to explain social phenomena. Theories can be used to create a testable proposition, called a hypothesis, about society.



BIG IDEA

A paradigm is different from a theory. A sociologist's paradigm is something semi-permanent about their approach to their work. One sociologist's paradigm might be that she is feminist, African-Americanist, and a conflict theorist, which means that she follows some general principles and ideas about her work and the world that may be shared by other sociologists who also identify themselves as feminists, African-Americanists, or conflict theorists. Her theories are the ideas she develops as a result of her work. Sociological theory is constantly evolving and should never be considered complete. Classic sociological theories are still considered important and current, but new sociological theories build upon the work of their predecessors and add to them.

IN CONTEXT

People attend many different types of colleges: community, vocational, online, hybrid, four-year, state funded or private. People choose their own route to higher education. Some may be focused on a career, others may wish to explore new things, and still others see college as a rite of passage. What factors contribute to the decision over where and how to attend college?

To begin answering this question, you could conduct research, interview people, even maybe arrange to audit some classes. After doing all of these things, you may find that people pick their college options based on what most of their high school senior class did. You may find that some families attend the same college over multiple generations. Maybe their state has incentivized early-college high school programs. Whatever the multitude of reasons people may give, you may decide that ultimately it is social class that has the biggest influence on where, when, why and how people choose to go on to higher education.

With sociological research, you start with a set of assumptions and then work to prove whether or not those assumptions are true and under which conditions it is true. But any two researchers may see this data and interpret it in a different way based on their paradigm. One may see that there are colleges for all people. Another may see how the class structure is maintained by an unequal and varied system of higher education.



TERMS TO KNOW

Paradigm

A broad viewpoint, perspective, or lens that permits social scientists to have a wide range of tools to describe society, and then to build hypotheses and theories.

Theory

A statement on how and why facts are related.

Sociological Theory

Explanations for the social behavior of people in groups.

2. How Theory Is Used

Three paradigms have come to dominate sociological thinking, because they have been demonstrated to provide reliable and valid lenses through which to view and compare societies: structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. These are not all of the paradigms, however, and throughout this course, we'll consider others as well as more specific topic-based variations of each of the "Big Three" theories.



HINT

In the following tutorials we will discuss these paradigms in much more detail. These are introductory summaries that you can refer to more easily.

The **structural-functional approach** states that society is a complex machine with interlocking parts that all

work together to keep the system going. If one of those parts fails to function, the whole machine can break down.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You could think of your body in this way. Your heart is in charge of pumping the blood. Your brain does the thinking. Your feet do the walking. All these separate parts work together to keep your system going. Society works in much the same way.

In the **social conflict approach** (also called conflict theory), conflict is the core of society. Think of all the fundamental conflicts that immediately come to mind—capitalist vs laborer, rich vs poor, atheists vs religious institutions, liberal vs conservative, etc. People act based on these conflicts, and this can lead to change.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Though capitalism is regarded as an open economic system in which everyone has the ability to move up the class ladder, it also requires a working class to keep it running. A capitalist economy needs a surplus of workers to do the most undesirable work in manufacturing and agriculture, so that a smaller number of people further up the ladder, like a factory owner, can benefit financially from those activities. Wages are kept low at the bottom to maximize profit at the top but also those low wages make it impossible for those workers to create a surplus for education, training or leisure time. It forces low wage workers to remain in those positions for generations, thus perpetuating the class system.

The **symbolic interaction approach** states that society is the result of all of our interactions combined. All meaning is created through interaction with each other. One-on-one relationships and interactions are indicative of the way status and values are demonstrated in the greater society. Society is constructed through a series of interactions.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you need an annual physical, you make an appointment with your doctor and when you arrive, you check in and then wait in the waiting room. You may or may not fill out paperwork. Eventually you are taken to a room and your vitals are recorded. When the doctor comes in, you proceed to provide information to the doctor so they can make a good appraisal of your health and needs at that time. The reason why you know what to do is because you are playing the role of the patient and the doctor is a person who is playing the role of doctor. If you were to go to the office and barge through into the back and tell the doctor what to do and how to do it, they might call the police on you because you have stepped outside of your accepted role. You may be the boss at your job, but at the doctor's office you are most definitely not.



Self and Social Awareness: Skill Tip

Using paradigms to deepen our understanding of society enables us to be more aware of ourselves and those around us. For instance, we may think or behave in a certain manner and discover that this is partially due to conflict theory. We may also examine our relationships and notice how we, and others, interact differently among varying groups. For instance, we will likely behave more professionally around colleagues and more casually around friends. This is mainly due to the symbolic interaction paradigm. Deeply examining these actions makes us more aware of how and why we, and others in our life, behave in a certain manner



THINK ABOUT IT

As you read about the three dominant sociological paradigms, think about which one aligns best with how

you understand the world.



TERMS TO KNOW

Structural-Functional Approach

An approach that sees society as a complex system with interlocking parts that each work together to maintain the system as a whole.

Social Conflict Approach

An approach to social theory that argues that society is characterized by various conflicts that cause people to act socially, producing change.

Symbolic Interaction Approach

A sociological approach that views society as the result of many individual, everyday interactions.

3. Macro- and Micro-Level Orientation

In addition to the three dominant theoretical approaches in sociology, there are two ways of viewing society and people in society: the macro and the micro. You can think of them as two levels of zooming in. You can zoom out to see the macro view of the whole big picture of society, or you can zoom in tight to the micro view of the details of individual lives.

The **macro-level orientation** in sociology is a broad look at society from up above. Recall the structural-functional theoretical approach, in which society is seen as a complex system with many parts that each work together to maintain the system as a whole—this is a macro view of society. It involves looking at big structures and interlocking parts.

On the other hand, the **micro-level orientation** in sociology is a much smaller zoom. You zoom into specific situations and look at individual interactions. People are seen as role players whose roles change based on the situation. Any one person can be a parent, boss, volunteer, patient, client, and child and act in the appropriate manner in those very different roles. How we interact with others is determined by our role in the interaction. So every doctor-patient relationship is similar to *all* doctor-patient relationships and follows most of the same routines and mores.

➔ **EXAMPLE** On a micro-level, one student might be deterred from entering a STEM field by an old-fashioned teacher who doesn't think girls are good at engineering. On a macro-level, engineering companies may not have sufficient women applicants to effectively diversify the field. One might combine these two levels to come up with the theory that women are still underrepresented at higher levels in all technical fields due to unfair access to opportunities and support.

Examining behavior of ourselves and others through micro- and macro-level orientation makes us more aware of ourselves and others. Given the previous example, we may understand that a woman who excels in math may be deterred from a career in engineering due to societal influence and a fear of discrimination due to working in a male-dominated field.



BIG IDEA

Theories vary in scope depending on the scale of the issues that they are meant to explain. Macro-level theories relate to large-scale issues and large groups of people, while micro-level theories look at very specific relationships between individuals or small groups.



TERMS TO KNOW

Macro-level Orientation

A zoomed out look at the social structures and institutions that shape society.

Micro-level Orientation

A zoomed-in focus on specific situations and individual interactions.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you saw how sociological theory explains the social behavior of people in groups by making connections between different facts, and **connecting facts into theories**. You learned **how theory is used** by sociologists to underpin their work, and how both **macro- and micro-level orientations** can be useful for viewing society. Finally, you explored the relationship between sociological theory and self and social awareness.

Best of luck in your learning!

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Theory

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